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Conflict and Consensus in the American Revolution

During the past fifteen or twenty years a division has emerged among historians of the American Revolution, a division between those who emphasize the consensus achieved by the revolting colonists and those who emphasize the conflicts among them. The division has excited attention and has perhaps been exaggerated because of the special position occupied by the Revolution in our national consciousness. As the noises of the approaching bicentennial grow louder, it is scarcely necessary to point out that most Americans, including historians, seem to think the Revolution was a good thing. If any episode in our past is enshrined in our consciousness, this is it. By consequence any group or cause that can affiliate itself with the Revolution may hope to have some goodness rub off on it. As an example, some of us can remember vividly the campaign of the 1930s to make the Revolution and its Founding Fathers rise to the support of Stalinism. Under the slogan "Communism is twentieth-century Americanism," Washington, Jefferson, and Franklin were enrolled posthumously in the popular front. We have similarly had, long since, Catholic interpretations of the Revolution and Calvinist interpretations, Massachusetts interpretations and Virginia interpretations, and a host of others, each somehow concerned with reflecting American-Revolutionary glory on Catholicism or Calvinism, on Massachusetts or Virginia, or whatever.

The alacrity with which the current division among scholars has been recognized, if not promoted, I believe, lies in this sanctifying power of the Revolution and its Founding Fathers. Those who contend that the Revolution bore few marks of social conflict or social upheaval seem to be denying the blessing of the Founding Fathers to present-day struggles against the establish-

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ment, while those who emphasize conflicts seem to be suggesting that conflicts, or at least conflicts against an upper class or established system, are sponsored by the Founding Fathers, consecrated in the fires at Valley Forge. No such power attaches to other episodes in our history. The New Deal, for example, has not achieved sanctifying power in the national memory. Hence no one would think to classify as conservative those historians who deny that the New Deal achieved or aimed at radical social change. But to say that the Revolution did not achieve or aim at radical social change and lacked the conflicts that generally accompany such change is taken as a denial that radical social change is a good thing. Hence those who give the Founding Fathers failing grades as social revolutionaries are greeted, sometimes to their astonishment, as conservative.

But conservative and radical are relative terms, and so are consensus and conflict; and relative terms, if I may be allowed to follow for a moment the logic of Peter Ramus, can be understood only in relation to each other. Those impressed by the achievement of consensus among the Revolutionists can scarcely hope to understand the nature of that consensus without understanding the conflicts that had to be overcome or repressed in order to arrive at it. Nor can those who emphasize conflict gauge the force of the movements they examine without considering the kind of consensus that later grew out of those movements or that succeeded in subduing them. Therefore, in attempting to assess the meaning of the American Revolution, it may be worthwhile to survey the various points of consensus and conflict that can be discerned in the Revolutionary period, to weigh their effect on the Revolution, and then to examine the kind of consensus that emerged at the end, even if that consensus is thought to be no more than a sullen acquiescence in the measures of a ruling class.

The type of internal conflict that historians have most eagerly searched for among Americans of the Revolutionary period is class conflict. The search is handicapped by a problem of identification. With the struggle of the colonies against the mother country dominating the scene, how does one distinguish a class conflict within that larger conflict?

Not by the side a man chose to support. Although the first historians of the loyalists did assume that they represented an upper if not a ruling class, subsequent investigations have revealed that loyalists, like patriots, were drawn from all classes. That a man sided with the mother country or against her tells us little about his social position. Although it seems altogether likely on the latest evidence that a larger percentage of the well-to-do could be found among the loyalists than among the Revolutionists, the Revolution cut sharply across nearly all previous divisions, whether regional, ethnic, religious, or class. It was not a conflict in which one side was predominantly upper class and the other predominantly lower class.

If, then, we look only at one side, at the Americans who supported the Revolution, or who did not oppose it, can we there find that lower-class rebels were bent on the overthrow or reduction of ruling-class rebels? A moment's

reflection on the nature of the Revolutionary War may moderate our expectations. The Revolutionary effort against Great Britain tended to suppress or encompass social conflicts. Where it did not, where hostility between social groups rose to a level of intensity approximating that of the conflict with the mother country, one group or the other would be likely to join with the loyalists. Some merchants in New York City, for example, felt that the local Revolutionary leaders threatened their interests more than the mother country did, and similarly some tenant farmers of the Hudson Valley felt more bitter toward their patriot landlords than they did toward king and Parliament. But these men, whether merchants or tenants, by joining the loyalist side deprived themselves of a part in any contest about who should rule at home. Loyalism in this way tended to absorb social groups that felt endangered or oppressed by the Revolutionary party. It operated as a safety valve to remove from the American side men who felt a high degree of social discontent. Or to change the figure, it drew off men at either end of the political spectrum, reducing the range of disagreements. It removed from the scene the intrinsics, of whatever persuasion, who might have prevented the achievement of consensus.

Disputes did occur, of course, among those who remained on the Revolutionary side, but the extraordinary social mobility characteristic of eighteenth-century American society usually prevented such disputes from hardening along class lines. Although recent statistical samplings point to a narrowing of economic opportunity in the latter half of the eighteenth century, Americans still enjoyed an upward mobility unknown in other societies. In a land of rising men a political group formed along lower-class lines had little prospect of endurance.

The Revolution probably increased social mobility temporarily both upward and downward, ruining the fortunes of many established families and opening opportunities for speedy ascent by daring upstarts. This very mobility engendered, as it always has, political disputes, but seldom along class lines. An American who had moved up from the lower ranks carried with him the expectation of sharing with those who had already arrived the offices of government traditionally exercised by the economically and socially successful. If he found himself excluded, he could call upon a wide electorate of his former equals but present inferiors to help him achieve the kind of office that they, no less than he, considered proper for successful men. But the fact that the lower ranks were involved in the contest should not obscure the fact that the contest itself was generally a struggle for office and power between members of an upper class: the new against the established. We must be wary of seeing such struggles, like Patrick Henry's successful bid for power in Virginia, as a rising of the oppressed against their masters.

I do not mean to argue that hostility between classes did not exist at all among those who supported the Revolution or that it cannot be discerned or recognized. In the antient riots of 1766, for example, New York tenant farmers expressed a hostility to their landlords that was not entirely absorbed by loyalism after 1775. More than one scholar has found clear expressions of class

conflict in the conduct of the war and of politics in Revolutionary New York. But in assessing class conflict as a Revolutionary force, we shall be hard pressed to find many instances outside New York in which antagonism rose to the level of actual fighting or even to openly expressed hostility of the kind that might be expected to lead to fighting.

American social structure was so fluid that to talk about social classes at all in most colonies or states requires the use of very loose economic categories such as rich, poor, and middle class, or contemporary designations like "the better sort" or "the poorer sort," or occupational categories like merchant, planter, lawyer, farmer, artisan, and seaman. Americans were no less skilled than other peoples in measuring the degree of deference due to each of their neighbors for the host of reasons and prejudices that confer honor or contempt on the members of any community. But such distinctions were local, seldom negotiable beyond the neighborhood where a man was known, and not always easy to discern even there.

Nevertheless, one absolute, clearly defined, and easily recognized division did exist, that between freeman and slave. Half a million Americans, perhaps a fifth of the total population, were slaves, and slavery is so direct an assault by one group of men on another that it can properly be considered as a form of class conflict in itself. In the American Revolution, however, slaves were unable to mount any serious uprising against their masters. Although the armies of both sides sooner or later made use of slaves and gave some of them freedom for their services, neither side provided the help necessary for large-scale insurrection. Both felt more need to woo masters than slaves. Perhaps the possibility of insurrection was even lessened by the few efforts of the British to promote it. When Lord Dunmore invited the slaves of Virginia to desert their masters and join his forces, he probably drew off many of the bolder individuals, leaving behind those who were less likely to rise in revolt later. Again loyalism tended to absorb men who might otherwise have directed their energies more radically against a local ruling class.

That the American Revolution did not produce an uprising of the group in colonial society that was most visibly and legally oppressed, and oppressed with the explicit or tacit approval of the rest of the society, is itself an instructive comment on the nature of social conflict and consensus during the Revolution.

The absence of any massive revolt, white or black, may perhaps be put in perspective if we compare the labor force of the Revolutionary period with that a century earlier, when Bacon's Rebellion had terrorized the first families of Virginia. In the seventeenth century as in the eighteenth the greater part of the colonial labor force, that is, of men who worked for other men, was concentrated in the South and especially in Virginia. In 1676, when Bacon's Rebellion occurred, the laborers were mostly imported servants, English, Irish, Scottish, or Welsh, whose terms of service generally expired when they reached the age of twenty-four. They were imported at the rate of eight hundred to a thousand or perhaps as many as fifteen hundred or two thousand annually;

they were mostly male, and they had come in expectation of a better life once their terms of service were up.

For a variety of reasons, in the ten or fifteen years before 1676, Virginia underwent a depression that severely curtailed the opportunities for a newly freed servant to make his way in the world. Tobacco prices were low. Land in the settled areas had been taken up in large quantities by earlier comers, and men either had to rent land at prices that left no room for profit or else they had to move to the frontiers, where Indians mounted guerrilla attacks on them. The officers of government lived high off the hog in spite of depression, by levying high taxes and voting each other generous fees, salaries, and sinecures. The result was the presence of a clearly distinguishable privileged class and a clearly distinguishable lower class, composed not merely of servants who made tobacco for their betters but of former servants who were trying to make it for themselves. These freedmen were likely to be single. They were likely to be without land of their own. But they were not likely to be without guns, especially those who had moved, as many had, to the frontier.

As early as 1673 Governor Berkeley recognized the dangers of this situation. At least one-third of Virginia's militia, he estimated, were single freedmen, who would have nothing to lose by turning their arms against their superiors for the sake of plunder. Three years later, goaded by Indian raids, they did it. Bacon's Rebellion swept across Virginia, starting among the penniless pioneers of the frontier counties and gathering momentum from the adherence of other men who had nothing to lose in a free-for-all scramble for the accumulated wealth of the privileged few. In the midst of it Berkeley wrote to England, understandably raising his estimate of the numbers of the disaffected. "How miserable that man is," he complained, "that Governes a People wher six parts of seaven at least are Poore Endebted Discontented and Armed."

A hundred years later the situation had changed radically in at least one important respect. In the South, where a large labor force still furnished the way to wealth for plantation owners, the laborers were not continually emerging into the status of independent, poverty-stricken, discontented freedmen trying to make a start against heavy odds. By the middle of the eighteenth century the majority of the entire labor force in the plantation colonies was held in permanent slavery. The development of slavery is perhaps the key to the consensus that prevailed in colonial America, for slavery meant the substitution of a helpless, closely guarded lower class for a dangerous, armed lower class that would fight if exploited too ruthlessly. The slave had more reason to revolt than the servant or the new freedman. But he was less able to. He had no hope, no rising expectations, and no arms. On top of that he was black. His status in the community was proclaimed by his color and maintained by a tyranny in which white men of all ranks and regions consented and approved. The consensus on which colonial society rested was a racist consensus.

Had the southern plantations not shifted from free to slave labor, had the planters continued to import masses of indentured servants and continued to pour them into their own and other colonies a few years later as indigent

freedmen, then the picture of social mobility in the colonial period and of class conflict in the Revolution might have been quite different. The minute-men of 1775 might have been truly a rabble in arms, ready to turn from fighting the British to fighting their well-to-do neighbors, just as Bacon's men turned from fighting the Indians to fighting Berkeley and his crew. But in the century between 1676 and 1776 the growth of slavery had curbed the growth of a free, depressed lower class and correspondingly magnified the social and economic opportunities of whites. It is perhaps the greatest irony of a Revolution fought in the name of freedom, a Revolution that indeed advanced the cause of freedom throughout the world, that the men who carried it out were able to unite against British oppression because they had so completely and successfully oppressed the largest segment of their own laboring population.

To be sure, there were those among the Revolutionists who felt uncomfortable about rebelling against what they chose to call the threat of slavery, while they themselves held some 20 percent of their own population in slavery. But such feelings were translated into legal action only in states where slaves were few in number. Those were not the states where an enslaved labor force grew the country's principal exports. And if northerners freed their own slaves, they did not propose at this time to free their neighbors'. The racial consensus on which colonial society had rested was shaken a little but not broken by the Revolution.

There of course continued to be indentured servants and servants who worked for wages both in the plantation colonies and in the North. But the great majority of men who worked for other men were probably the slaves of the plantation colonies. The growing economy, in spite of periodic depressions like that of the 1670s, could absorb the number of indentured servants who turned free each year and could offer most of them an independent and comfortable if not affluent existence on the land. Only a small minority fell permanently into the servant class, like some of the sailors whom Jesse Lemisch has described, and even they reacted more visibly, violently, and vociferously against iniquities of the British government than against whatever oppression was visited upon them by their compatriots.

In sum, the evidence of Revolutionary class conflict is scanty, and for good reason. With a majority of laborers in chains and with the most discontented freemen venting their discontent in loyalism, the struggle over who should rule at home was unlikely to bear many of the marks of class conflict. Class conflict was indubitably present, but it did not surface with an effective intensity until a later day, after the Revolution had built a consensus that could both nourish and contain it, and after social, political, and economic change had produced greater provocations to it.

Let us turn now to another kind of conflict that was more intense and also, I believe, more significant for the Revolution. If we examine the occasions when Americans fought with one another or came very close to fighting between 1763 and 1789, excluding battles between loyalists and patriots, we find a number of episodes, all of them involving men who had moved from the

older coastal regions into the interior: the march of the Paxton Boys against Philadelphia, the Regulator movement in the Carolinas with its Battle of Alamance, the activities of the Green Mountain Boys in Vermont, the skirmishes of Pennamite and Yankee in the Wyoming Valley of Pennsylvania, and Shays's Rebellion in Massachusetts. However diverse in immediate cause and attendant circumstance, these conflicts had one thing in common: they were all manifestations of the discontent of western settlers or settlers on new lands against governments dominated by or subservient to the interests of older or eastern regions.

Americans of the Revolutionary period were less successful in repressing sectional conflicts than conflicts arising from class or race. Though this fact is obvious and though the westward movement has received its full share of attention, historians considering the Revolution as a social movement have not always borne in mind two conspicuous conditions of life in eighteenth-century America, conditions that lay at the root of East-West conflict: first, the extraordinary rate of population growth and, second, the abundance of land, unoccupied or only thinly occupied by the native Indians.

Although the rate of population growth in the colonies varied a good deal from place to place and from year to year, the overall long-range trend is clear. The total population of the thirteen colonies that participated in the Revolution more than doubled every twenty-five years during the eighteenth century. Beginning at about 250,000 in 1700, it rose to over 5,000,000 by 1800. As we learn more about the role of population growth in history, it may ultimately appear that the most significant social fact about America in the eighteenth century was this fearful growth, unlike anything that had been known in Europe in recorded history. Every twenty-five years the colonies had to absorb numbers equal to their total population. The result by the last quarter of the eighteenth century was explosive emigration out of the older settled regions into the West. Consider the westward thrust into the Kentucky-Tennessee area alone: the population there could scarcely have amounted to 10,000 in 1781; by 1790 it had soared to 110,000. If we note that this migration over the mountains in the 1780s by itself dwarfed the so-called Great Migration over the ocean in the 1630s, when probably no more than 50,000 left England for all parts of the New World, if we note also that migration was simultaneously occurring into other western areas, then we may begin to appreciate the magnitude of a western factor in the Revolutionary period.

The westward population explosion probably relieved the East from social conflicts that might have arisen from overcrowding; but it generated other conflicts potentially as dangerous. It set rival groups of speculators into contests for control of the richest western lands, contests that drew in and corrupted state governments and the national government. And it created a block of Americans who by moving west acquired different needs and interests from eastern Americans, but who by the same move lost their political ability to make their needs heard or attended to. People moved west so rapidly that even with the best of intentions a government could scarcely have kept up with them in fur-

nishing the town or parish or county organization that formed the units of representation in the legislature. Because representation did not keep up with the expansion of population into new territory, governments remained under the domination of easterners and frequently neglected the needs of westerners. Even where representation was fairly proportioned, the location of the legislature subjected it to eastern influences that could bring it into serious conflict with the West.

Eastern insensitivity to western needs was the source of the Paxton incident, as it had been in part of Bacon's Rebellion. The prime western need in the early years of a settlement was to cope with the Indians, who gathered to attack the invaders of their land. Indian raids were no longer part of life in the East. The very existence of westerners furnished a buffer zone to easterners, enabling them to view the rights and wrongs of the situation with an objectivity that westerners could not achieve or afford. We need not assume that the Paxton Boys were righteous. Benjamin Franklin called them "Christian White Savages," and the epithet was deserved. They were armed thugs, terrorists, murderers; but they were also westerners, and as westerners they had grievances against an eastern-dominated legislature that spent its time arguing about who would pay the bills while it neglected the defense of the frontier.

The Regulator movement represents another phase of the same East-West conflict: the eastern-dominated governments of South Carolina and North Carolina failed to extend the machinery of law enforcement into the West as rapidly as the needs of the settlers required, and so the West took the law in its own hands. In Shays's Rebellion the Shayites, who also called themselves Regulators, hoped to gain by direct action what the government in Boston had denied them. The Pennamite-Yankee conflict and the activities of the Green Mountain Boys offer a variation on the theme. In these cases two colonial governments, representing different speculative interests, were engaged in a contest for western lands, and the actual settlers fought with each other. The significance of the frontier in early American history, if we may borrow that phrase, was that it kept Americans in conflict. Movement of the exploding population into new lands was continually generating new communities with interests differing from those of the older communities that retained, or at least claimed, control over them.

This kind of internal conflict among Americans was far more visible during the Revolutionary period than was class conflict. Although there were overtones of class conflict in any contest between established eastern interests and the interests of pioneer western farmers, the contest was primarily geographical, created by the problem of stretching the social and political apparatus that bound one group of people to another in the expanding American universe.

That this form of conflict produced more active hostility in the Revolutionary period will seem no more than natural if we view the Revolution itself from the same perspective. The English colonies in America stood to England

in the way that the western parts of the colonies stood to the eastern parts, but with even stronger grievances and correspondingly stronger hostility. The institutions that England devised for her overseas emigrants in the wake of the Great Migration were even more inadequate by 1776 than the institutions that they had devised for themselves. While many colonial legislatures had too few representatives from their western areas, Parliament, which could legislate for all the colonies, had not a single representative from them. When the colonists cried out that Parliament without American representatives knew nothing about their needs and had no right to tax them, they spoke to England in the voice of westerners speaking to easterners. In the Declaration of Independence they announced that the social and political bonds that tied them to an eastern government were severed. The American Revolution was itself a revolt of settlers in a new land against a government that by its location and composition could not be properly acquainted with their needs and could not keep up with their growth.

After 1776, in seeking to sustain the new nation they had just proclaimed themselves to be, the Americans had to contain the very force that had impelled their revolt against the mother country. If the colonies could secede from England, the West could secede from the East for the same reasons. The danger was aggravated by the fact that slavery and loyalty, which helped to lower tension between classes, perversely heightened tension between East and West. Since slavery did not move westward as rapidly as freedom, the much higher concentration of slaves in the East served to emphasize the difference in sectional interests. And since loyalty had as much appeal for disaffected regions as for disaffected individuals, it could become a catastrophic ingredient in sectional conflicts. If an entire region became sufficiently hostile to a government dominated by easterners, it might choose to rejoin the mother country. The result, as in the defection of individuals or groups, might be a greater harmony among those remaining. But the defection of a whole region could have jeopardized the viability of the Union; and a consensus formed by the secession of all dissident elements would scarcely deserve the name.

The British were not slow to recognize the advantages for them of sectional conflict and kept hoping for it after the war was over. In violation of the treaty they clung to their northwest trading posts, flirted with the disgruntled leaders of Vermont, and made plans for detaching the whole Northwest. Nor was Britain the only recourse for discontented westerners: Spain had eyes on the whole Southwest. She came uncomfortably close to detaching Kentucky when the Spanish minister maneuvered the Continental Congress into what appeared to westerners as a gross display of eastern indifference to western interests. If Congress had actually ratified the Jay-Cardoqui Treaty, with its seeming recognition of Spanish control of the Mississippi, the Americans who marched across the mountains into Kentucky and Tennessee in the 1780s might well have marched right into the arms of Spain.

In sum, while class conflict tended to be muted during the Revolutionary period by social mobility among whites, by the enslavement of blacks, and by

loyalism, sectional conflict was aggravated. The gravest form of sectional conflict was East-West, but it was not the only form. The greater North-South conflict had already cast its ominous shadow in congressional voting alignments, in the uneasiness of both northerners and southerners over the continuance of slavery, and in steps taken toward abolition of slavery in the North, but not in the South. The most farsighted Americans sensed already that North-South differences as well as East-West differences might one day lead to secession. Indeed in the late 1780s so many sectional disagreements were festering that men who had led their states to a united independence fifteen years earlier now predicted the breakup of the American nation.

We know that it did not break up. What, then, other than the superior wisdom of the Founding Fathers, prevented the breakup? What sort of consensus enabled Americans to contain not only the immediate threats to their Union perceived in the 1780s but also the threats that grew with time from sectional and class conflict? The question in some measure answers itself. The Americans did achieve nationality during the Revolutionary period, and nationalism has proved to be the most powerful, if the least understood, social force of modern times. In the shrinking world of the twentieth century it has often been a sinister force, confining the vision of its devotees to a single country when they should be looking at the entire globe. But for Americans of the Revolutionary period the world was expanding instead of shrinking, and nationalism exerted a cohesive influence among the people of the several states, stretching instead of confining their political horizons. Even Jefferson, whose state loyalties proved particularly strong, urged his fellow Virginians to send their best young men to Congress, so that they could acquire the continental vision early. That vision extended not merely up and down the Atlantic seaboard but westward to the areas where Americans were moving so rapidly in the 1780s. It scarcely occurred to Jefferson that the United States might not one day reach to the Pacific and indeed occupy the whole of North America, and perhaps the Caribbean and South America too. If not everyone felt this way, there were enough who did to give American nationalism an expansive quality and to make her statesmen conscious of the need to retain the westward migrants within the national community.

Nationalism was in itself the strongest force binding Americans of the Revolutionary generation together. Devotion to the nation helped to keep both sides in any conflict on speaking terms, helped to make disagreements negotiable within the framework of national politics, and even made possible the creation of a new and stronger framework in 1787 when the old one proved unsatisfactory. But nationalism was not the only force disposing Americans to bury their conflicts. The racial consensus of colonial times, though challenged and diminished, still prevailed and helped to keep the North-South conflict from coming to center stage. The Revolutionists were not prepared to allow the issue of freedom for blacks to threaten the union of whites. By the consent of white Americans the American labor force, concentrated in the South, remained for the most part in slavery, outside the arena where American quarrels

and conflicts were expected to take place. Contending factions, whether of class, region, or party, were agreed in not seeking or expecting the participation of men in chains.

The exclusion of most laborers meant that the participants on both sides of any conflict were men who possessed formidable powers, powers that were carefully withheld from slaves. Both sides could negotiate from strength and demand compromise. Although repression might be an effective mode of dealing with discontent or insubordination from slaves, it did not recommend itself as a way of handling men who had the means to fight back either politically or, if necessary, with force. Unlike the peasants of the Old World, Americans, or at least those Americans without black skin, possessed two palpable sources of power: most of them owned the land on which they lived, and a very large number of them owned guns. Land gave them economic and political power, and guns, we may as well admit, gave them firepower.

In the events that led up to the Revolution, England had failed to recognize the strength that these two kinds of power gave to her colonists. The colonists themselves knew at first hand that the ownership of land enabled a man to bid defiance to those who had traditionally controlled society through control of its lands. They had developed a society in which deference to birth and wealth was tempered by constant reminders to the rich and wellborn that their authority rested on the consent of ordinary property owners. Most adult male Americans owned property and could vote for the men who made the laws that affected their property. If they generally voted for a local bigwig, a man who held more property than they did, they did not hesitate to dump him if he neglected their interests. Similarly, within the legislative assemblies lesser men bowed to the leadership of bigger ones. As Robert Zensky has shown, social status counted for more than seniority in at least one colonial assembly. But when the leaders of the assembly brought in a bill that looked oppressive to the back-benchers, they voted it down and even substituted impromptu measures of their own from the floor.

What alarmed Americans about taxation by Parliament was that they could not vote it down. The program that seemed so conventional and so reasonable from the standpoint of Whitehall appeared to the Americans as a threat to the power that enabled them to direct their own lives. If a legislature to which they elected no member could take their property in taxes, that legislature could ultimately take all their property and reduce them to the impotence of which they had such visible examples in the slaves at their feet. It was consensus on this point that enabled the colonies to unite so suddenly and so successfully against parliamentary taxation. The American reaction to parliamentary taxation seemed to England too hysterical and wicked to be genuine, and her statesmen failed to deal with it adequately, partly because they failed to recognize its existence.

The British failed also to recognize the existence of American firepower. It would perhaps be an exaggeration to say that most Americans had guns and knew how to use them. But it seems likely that nowhere else in the world at

the time was there a population so well armed as the Americans. Governor Berkeley had perceived and experienced the implications of this fact in 1676, and as early as 1691 William Blathwayt, the English auditor general for the colonies, who was more conversant in colonial affairs than any other Englishman of the time, recorded with admiration the familiarity of the colonists with guns. "There is no Custom more generally to be observed among the young Virginians," he noted, "than that they all learn to keep and use a gun with a Marvellous dexterity as soon as ever they have strength enough to lift it to their heads." Had Lord North been as keenly aware as Blathwayt of the skills thus acquired, he and George III might not have underestimated so badly the American capacity for resistance.

In order to maintain themselves as a single nation, Americans had to recognize the economic power and firepower that Britain ignored. By the time of the Revolution the proportion of the population owning land in the East may have been somewhat reduced from what it had been fifty or a hundred years earlier, but the westerner by definition was a man who had broken out of the limited acreage of the East. Whether or not he held a secure title, he knew how to make his living from the land and to make life uncomfortable for anyone who tried to stop him. And he was even more likely than the easterner to be armed. The westerner in our history has always been a man with a gun. Eastern-dominated governments simply did not have sufficient power of their own in the long run to impose on the West conditions that armed westerners would not agree to, any more than the Continental Congress could have imposed its edicts on the states, as some members proposed, by the use of military force. American nationalism was obliged to start with the assumption that the population was armed and that no group within it, slaves excepted, could be pushed very hard in any direction it did not want to go.

With a population already equalized to a large degree by firepower and economic power, the United States began its independence appropriately with the declaration that all men are created equal. The immediate purpose was to affirm the equality of England's transatlantic colonists with Englishmen in England, who were taxed only by their elected representatives. But the simplicity of the declaration of equality endowed it with a resonance that was momentous for the whole subsequent history of the nation whose existence it announced.

It could not have been predicted at the time that this would become a national creed. The men who adopted the declaration in 1776 would scarcely have been unanimous if they had been obliged to state precisely what they meant by "created equal." Many of them, including the author of the phrase, held slaves. If the preceding analysis is correct, the fact that they were able to unite at all depended in part on their denial of equality to black Americans. Even when applied only to white Americans, the meaning of equality was hardly as self-evident as Congress declared the proposition itself to be. The equality promulgated by the Congress at Philadelphia had no power to dissolve at once the conflicts and tensions in American society. Westerners were

obliged for several years to flirt with Spain and England, while eastern speculators, many of them in Congress, quarreled over the profits they hoped to gain from western settlement if the West could be kept under eastern domination. James Madison tried in vain to secure a guarantee in the Federal Constitution of the equality of western states. Instead the principle was precariously acknowledged only as a result of a shady bargain during the last weeks of the expiring Continental Congress.

But acknowledged it was in the end. The Northwest Ordinance, by stipulating that western states should be admitted to the Union on equal terms with the existing states, saved the nation from future attempts to make subordinate colonists out of its western emigrants. As the Revolutionists gradually became aware of the implications of the creed to which they had committed themselves, they also whittled down, albeit even more gradually, the inequities in their laws governing religion, representation, and inheritance. And as the social structure of the nation changed in subsequent generations, Americans probed further into the meaning of equality.

It has generally taken more than the chanting of the creed to bring about the social justice that it promises. Our history is not the chronicle of steady and continuous application of the principle of equality to match the continuous expansion of the population. The reluctance of easterners to grant equal rights to westerners was prophetic of later contests. Those who have claimed the benefits of equality in America have usually had to press their own claims against stubborn opposition. Men with power over other men have often affirmed their dedication to the principle while denying it by their actions, masters denying it to slaves, employers to workmen, natives to immigrants, whites to blacks, men to women.

Is it fair, then, to call this a point of consensus? Was it not mere rhetoric? Perhaps, if by rhetoric is meant the terms on which men can agree to speak together. An alternative rhetoric and an alternative social creed prevailed before the Revolution both in America and Europe and continued to prevail in most of Europe. That creed also offered a way to consensus, but of a quite different sort. It affirmed divine sanction for a social hierarchy in which every man knew his place and was expected to keep it. The old creed was designed to suppress the aspirations of lower classes, to make them content with their lot. Redress of grievances was not impossible, if superiors failed in their acknowledged obligations to inferiors; but the likelihood was much greater that oppression would go unchecked and that resentment would build into an explosive, revolutionary situation before redress could be obtained. The American Revolution itself was brought on by a British minister who had rejected what he called "the absurd opinion that all men are equal." That absurd opinion became the basis of the American consensus that grew out of the Revolution.

It may indeed seem an absurd sort of consensus that rests upon an invitation to conflict. The creed of equality did not give men equality, but invited them to claim it, invited them, not to know their place and keep it, but to seek

and demand a better place. Yet the conflicts resulting from such demands have generally, though not always, stopped short of large-scale violence and have generally eventuated in a greater degree of actual equality. After each side has felt out the other's strengths and weaknesses, some bargain, some equivalent to a Northwest Ordinance, is agreed upon, leaving demands not quite fulfilled, leaving the most radical still discontented with remaining inequalities, but keeping the nation still committed to the creed of equality and bound to move, if haltingly, in the direction it signals.

While the creed invites resistance by the oppressed, it also enjoins accommodation by the oppressor. If it is mere rhetoric, it is a rhetoric that has kept conservatism in America on the defensive. The power that the consensus of equality has wielded over the minds of Americans ever since the Revolution is in fact nowhere more clearly exhibited than in the posture it has imposed on conservatism. To Europeans it may seem odd for conservatism to be garbed in the language of human equality, but conservatives in America quickly learned that this was the only acceptable dress in which they could appear in public. In order to argue for special privilege in the United States it was necessary to show—and it sometimes required considerable legerdemain—that special privilege was somehow the outcome of equality or a device to protect equality. John Adams, for example, contended that Americans should reserve a special place in their governments for the rich, the talented, and the well-born, on the grounds that it was necessary to isolate and thus ostracize and disarm these dangerous men in order to preserve equality. A century later William Graham Sumner argued against every kind of social legislation on the grounds that all Americans were created equal, so that every American who attained wealth and position had done so by his own efforts and therefore deserved to keep what he had earned, while the poor equally deserved their poverty. To aid the poor would threaten equality.

If these arguments today seem ludicrous, it is because conservatism in the United States has often been reduced to the ludicrous by the national commitment to equality. A conservatism based on a more congenial premise can make little headway. When the South, long after the Revolution, attempted to defend slavery on another premise, the attempt generated the greatest crisis American nationality has faced. The resulting conflict did not really destroy the racial consensus among whites and did not achieve equality for Negroes, but it did destroy slavery and it did preserve the national commitment to equality. That commitment is gradually eroding racism. And it continues to serve the oppressed, both black and white, in their efforts to attain what the nation has promised them, just as it also serves to keep most of the oppressed from totally rejecting a society that admits their right to an equal treatment not yet received.

If, then, the American Revolution produced a consensus among the victorious Americans, it was not a static consensus but one with the genius to serve changing times and needs. It was a consensus that invited conflicts and still invites them, a consensus peculiarly adapted to a growing people, a people

on the move both geographically and socially. It could not have contained, but it did not produce, the kind of conflict that gave Charles I his Cromwell. It made instead for a society where a Hamilton had his Jefferson, a Hoover his Roosevelt, and a Nixon—might profit by their example. If this be conservatism, it is radicals who have made the most of it.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Carl Becker's argument that the American Revolution was a conflict within the colonies as well as a struggle against England may be found in his **History of Political Parties in the Province of New York, 1760-1776* (Madison, 1909). Arthur M. Schlesinger, **Colonial Merchants and the American Revolution* (New York, 1918), gives support to Becker's position by showing how merchants sought to protect their interests against both England and other groups in colonial society. A classic little study showing the social upheaval resulting from the revolutionary struggle is J. Franklin Jameson, **The American Revolution Considered as a Social Movement* (Princeton, N.J., 1926). These views are generally upheld in a more recent study by Elisha P. Douglass, *Rebels and Democrats* (Chapel Hill, 1955). Michael Kammen, *A Season of Youth: The American Revolution and the Historical Imagination* (New York, 1978), traces the meaning of the Revolution over two hundred years.

Edmund S. Morgan, **The Birth of the Republic, 1763-89* (Chicago, 1956), disputes the contention that there were sharp divisions among the colonists and instead finds a basic consensus among the revolutionaries. A different emphasis emerges in a study of many of the same events in Merrill Jensen, *The Founding of a Nation: A History of the American Revolution, 1763-1776* (New York, 1968). Louis Hartz, "Democracy Without a Democratic Revolution," *American Political Science Review*, 46 (June 1952), pp. 321-42, argues that because in America there was no aristocratic or feudal tradition to overthrow, the Revolution was no revolution at all. In Chapter III of his **Genius of American Politics* (Chicago, 1953), Daniel J. Boorstin uses very different evidence to come to conclusions similar to those of Louis Hartz.

Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass, 1967), rejects the concept of a social or internal revolution, suggesting instead that revolutionary ideas, accepted by the colonists for more than a century before the actual conflict, are what made the American Revolution truly revolutionary. On this point see also Gordon S. Wood, **The Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1787* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1969). In his "A Note on Mobs in the American Revolution," *William and Mary Quarterly*, XXIII (October 1966), pp. 635-42, Wood compares American and European revolutionary mobs. Jesse Lemisch, "Jack Tar in the Streets: Merchant Seamen in the Politics of Revolutionary America," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 25 (July 1968), pp. 371-407, arguing that the Revolution should be seen from the point of view of the common man, gives support to the conflict interpretation and adds another dimension to the discussion of the mob in revolutionary America. Pauline Maier, **From Resistance to Revolution: Colonial Radicals and The Development of*